Might be a great test of the potential

WITHOUT A DOUBT, the one great issue in the Greater Toronto Area is transportation infrastructure, and although there are huge differences of opinion on how to deal with the worsening gridlock there is a consensus that something must be done.

Interestingly, recent stories in the Toronto dailies have identified John Tory's SmartTrack proposal as perhaps the single platform plank that secured his victory as Toronto's mayor-elect.

Faced with opponent Doug Ford's embracing of the alternative of massive spending on new subways, Mr. Tory was able to show that SmartTrack would not only fit in with the Ontario government's commitment to electrify the area's GO train lines but was less costly and supposedly capable of being in operation in merely seven years.

The scheme, as we understand it, is to use the existing GO train corridors and provide 15-minute service from Pearson Airport in the west to Uxbridge in the northeast, with about 22 stops and all-day service of the sort found in many large European cities.

One thing missing as yet is any indication of the type of rail equipment Mr. Tory envisions, but we suspect it will be similar to the trains planned for the Metrolinx service between Union Station and Pearson Airport, although initially those trains will be diesel-powered.

We like Mr. Tory's scheme but fear it doesn't go nearly far enough, for several reasons.

First and foremost, our concern is that the scheme, as described during the Toronto election campaign debates, is basically a single ?U'-shaped route that in Etobicoke doesn't follow the existing CNR tracks north of Eglinton Avenue. As indicated in this space a few weeks ago, our strong preference would be for SmartTrack to operate at least as far as both Brampton and Bolton, and for service to the airport be via an extension of the Eglinton LRT (light rail transit) line already under construction. All that would be required is a convenient transfer station at Eglinton plus the already-needed double-tracking of the CP line between Weston and Bolton, with alternating westbound trains going to Brampton and Bolton.

Our other major concern is that, with a few modifications, the SmartTrack concept could and should be employed on all the rail corridors radiating out of Toronto.

Here, the greatest problem appears to be GO Transit's historic fixation with having only double-decker trains capable of moving thousands of passengers. (That wasn't always the case. The original GO trains between Oakville and Pickering had ordinary, single-level coaches.)

What we see as an important potential improvement in the GO train operation would be the acquisition of at least 50 self-propelled lightweight ?hybrid' coaches, with electric motors powered optionally by natural gas.

Such an acquisition would fit perfectly with the Ontario government's promotion of ?green' energy while producing double benefits: potential commuter service to places like Orangeville, Alliston and Peterborough, and major cost savings through replacement of the double-decker trains now running on the Lakeshore line in off-peak hours, when they now carry only a few hundred passengers.

The coaches we envision would be lightweight versions of the ?Budd cars? that once sped passengers between Owen Sound and Toronto, making the trips in three hours, and are still in use for Via Rail service between Sudbury and White River. (One of them, minus its two engines, is used occasionally on our Credit Valley Explorer tour train.)

Although such coaches wouldn't carry more than 70 passengers each, every six-coach train would mean more than 400 cars off the roads, all doing their bit to battle gridlock while offering commuters a far better, safer way to and from work.

It's surely an idea worth exploring, an option that Metrolinx might consider if it won support from places like Dufferin County

Council, MP David Tilson and MPP Sylvia Jones, who might even suggest a test using the municipally owned Orangeville Brampton Railway.